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ABSTRACT

The author describes a counselor education program based on the promise that self-understanding and self-awareness are as important as acquisition of skills, techniques, and knowledge for persons planning to enter the helping professions. In attempting to create a climate of high trust in which self exploration can occur, the faculty has implemented special features such as basic encounter groups, community meetings, open office policy, open classes, co-learning, and student feedback about their perceptions of the value of the program. Some of the problems of managing a humanistic student centered orientation within the framework of a competency-based program are discussed. Limited data are presented showing how program emphases are viewed by former students and how competencies have been evaluated. Attention is also given to experimental procedures designed to specific counselor competencies. (Author)

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Self-Understanding and Self-Awareness in a Counselor Education Program

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Abstract

Self-Understanding and Self-Awareness in

a Counselor Education Program

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The author describes a counselor education program based on the premise that self-understanding and self-awareness are as important as acquisition of skills, techniques, and knowledge for persons planning to enter the helping professions. In attempting to create a climate of high trust in which self exploration can occur, the faculty has implemented special features such as basic encounter groups, community meetings, open office policy, open classes, co-learning, and student feedback about their perceptions of the value of the program. Some of the problems of managing a humanistic student centered orientation within the framework of a competency based program are discussed. Limited data are presented showing how program emphases are viewed by former students and how competencies have been evaluated. Attention is also given to experimental procedures designed to specific counselor competencies.

Self-Understanding and Self-Awareness in a Counselor Education Program

Theodore F. Renick

St. Lawrence University

The importance of self-awareness and self-understanding of counselors has been frequently pointed out by leaders in the field of counselor education (Arbuckle 1975; Corlis and Rabe 1969; Gazda, et al, 1973; Ohlsen 1974). The basic theme of these writers and others is that the counselor must have a high degree of self-understanding and immediate awareness of feelings in order to be able to understand and communicate effectively with the counselee.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the value of self-understanding and self-awareness as part of counselor education, to describe the procedures utilized to bring about such understanding and awareness, to present some data in support of the philosophy, and to discuss some problems and conflicts encountered in maintaining a humanistic orientation within the context of a competency based program.

Characteristics of the Program

The Master's degree level Counselor Education Program at St. Lawrence University is relatively small with an enrollment each year of around fifteen full-time students and approximately twenty part-time students. Although the main emphasis of the program is directed toward preparation of public school counselors, many of the students plan to work in college student personnel,

social service, community agencies, and religious organizations. Most of the full-time students are recent college graduates, while the part-time students are teachers, social service workers, and housewives.

The counselor education faculty has attempted to create a learning community based on the principle that people planning to work as counselors must experience relationships in which the facilitative conditions of positive regard, empathic understanding, genuineness, and specificity are communicated if these students are to be able to establish them in their own subsequent counseling situations and other interpersonal relationships. The importance of the facilitative conditions as necessary and sufficient for therapeutic change was indicated by Rogers (1957), and later elaborated by Gazda (1973) and Aspy (1975) regarding their value in educational settings. The intent of the faculty, therefore, is to establish a community where everyone, faculty and students, can learn together and where trust is high, responsibility is prized, and threat is minimal. We believe that students who are free of threat and placed in a non-competitive environment will learn because they want to learn and also be willing to share what they are learning with other students.

Because much of the work in the program is experiential, individuals applying for admission to the program are encouraged to talk with matriculated students and to visit classes so they can have a sample of what it is like to be a student. The importance of a voluntary committment to a humanistically oriented program

based on sound information about the program was pointed out by Banikiotes (1975).

Early in the fall semester "community meetings" for all students and staff are held to raise questions, share ideas, make suggestions, and hopefully make known any complaints and concerns. These meetings do not continue on a regular schedule, but are called whenever any member of "the community" wants to have one.

A two-day encounter group is held midway in the first semester and all students are encouraged to participate. It is made clear by the staff that students have the right not to participate and that non-participation will in no way be held against them. The groups are conducted at a comfortable college owned lodge in the Adirondack Mountains, usually beginning on Wednesday evening and ending Friday mid-day. The model followed in the group sessions is the Basic Encounter Group as described by Rogers (1970) and Coulson (1970). The purpose of the group experience is to help students and staff develop trust and mutual respect. The tone of the group work is very low key; no one is required to talk. The emphasis is upon understanding self and others, establishing a community of low threat and high trust, and focusing on the here and now as much as possible.

Open office policy is practiced by staff members, and this means that when the office door is open, students are welcomed and encouraged to drop in to chat individually or in groups. Many times the office is crowded, and some of the more timid students are hesitant to break in. However, they gradually learn to come in and freely participate with their peers. When a student needs to have a private

talk with a faculty member, the procedure is to make an appointment. This assures the student that the faculty member will have time for him or her and that the conference will not be interrupted by other people. On these occasions, the door is closed.

Classes vary in structure depending upon the nature of the subject matter and the number of students enrolled. All faculty members try to help students find their own learning styles. This may result in breaking the class into small special interest groups, permitting some students to work independently, and bringing in specialists from the larger community who have expertise in areas with which the instructor is unfamiliar.

Faculty members attempt to reduce the teacher-student distinction because they are convinced that they are learners as well as the students. For students who have experienced highly traditional education, this approach creates confusion and some frustration until they can begin to identify what they want to learn and at what pace their learning can proceed. A fairly typical example is the student who comes to a professor about his or her confusion in the program, and the crux of the problem is that the student is floundering with many new ideas and is experiencing frustration because he or she cannot suddenly have everything in perspective or find the key to instant knowledge. It is at such a point that the faculty can help the student identify questions for which answers can be sought and to suggest specific readings and resource people, including other students, faculty, and people outside the university community. Working through the confusion and frustration is an important process if the student is to acquire a sense of strength

and self-confidence. This process appears to bring about an awareness of self in terms of learning experiences that have pay-off. The student is assuming responsibility for his or her own learning.

Another direct attempt to facilitate self-understanding is in the requirement that each student goes through the H. D. I. General Relationship Improvement Program (Human Development Institute 1972) with a partner as part of the Techniques of Counseling course. This program requires ten sessions and is designed to improve communication skills and increase self-understanding. Also, the instructor of an Educational Psychology course requires each student to keep a journal of his or her personal reactions to readings, classroom experiences, and any other experiences that they want to write about. The professor reads the journals regularly and writes responses to the students. Student reactions to this procedure are quite favorable because it helps them relate the readings to their own personal experiences, i.e., phenomenological field, and to have a sense that they know the professor and are known by him as individuals.

Evaluation

The data presented here are limited because the number of students involved is not large, and the attempts to evaluate certain aspects of the program are just beginning. One effort to determine the practicality of the emphases placed on various attitudes, skills, and knowledge was the administration of an instrument called "The Counselor Education Assessment Inventory," developed by this writer. The inventory listed twenty-two competencies of the program. Indi-

viduals who had completed the program between 1970 and 1974 were asked to rate the degree of emphasis placed on the skills, attitudes, and knowledge listed in the Counselor Education Program, using a five-point scale ranging from very little emphasis to very much and to rate the degree of importance of each one in their current working situation on the same one to five scale. It was expected that analyses of the difference between emphasis in the program and importance on the job would lead to a second survey to find out whether greater or lesser emphases in the program on the competencies where differences were significant would be helpful to students. For purposes of this paper, only the data on items dealing with self-understanding and self-awareness will be presented. For each item a two-tailed t test was used to determine whether the mean difference scores were significantly different from zero. We were not originally interested in how high or low the ratings were. We were concerned with perceived discrepancies between the program emphases and job importance. Of the four items most closely associated with self-understanding, three of the t values did not reach the significance level, and one was significant at the .05 level. The items and t values are presented in Table I.

TABLE I

Comparison Between Perceived Emphasis in a Counselor Education Program and On-the-Job-Importance of Self-Understanding and Self-Awareness

Item	$\bar{D}$	N	t
1. Understanding yourself.	.049	41	.45
2. Personal responsibility and self-direction.	.1	41	.81
3. Establishing effective relationships with individuals and groups.	.024	41	.22
4. Awareness of personal and professional limits and the ability to make appropriate referrals.	.436	39	2.10*

*$p < .05$ two tailed

The results in Table I suggests that program emphases were perceived by the subjects as being congruent with perceived job importance of self-understanding as expressed in the items. However, the difference that was indicated in the awareness of personal and professional limits and the ability to make referrals suggests further investigation to determine whether or not some modification in the program emphasis is in order.

Another form of supportive data for emphasizing self-understanding in the Counselor Education Program was found in the additional free responses given by graduates to the statement asking them to add any comments they felt would be helpful in improving the program. Twenty-five of the questions returned contained additional comments. Of these, three consisted of suggestiors about the program content, while twenty-two respondents specifically referred to the personal value of the self-understanding and self-

awareness gained, resulting from their experiences as graduate students. It must be noted that there are limitations to any conclusions drawn from the data presented above. The data could be biased by the types of individuals who responded because those who had positive attitudes about their student experiences were more likely to respond than those with neutral or negative attitudes. Fifty-four questionnaires were mailed and forty-one were returned. In addition, their responses were based on personal subjective judgments, and there is no established reliability of the instrument used.

Evaluation of student performance in the form of competencies has been a slow and difficult task for a variety of reasons; the most overriding is identifying specific measureable behaviors which are consistent with the humanistic philosophy of the program. This problem was presented by Arbuckle (1975). The task is to find means of assessment that do not destroy the elements of high trust and low threat so that students will continue learning because of self-motivation, and not learning what they must do to meet minimal levels of competency.

We have experimented with several methods of assessing competencies of students and have found that although no one method is completely satisfactory, some hold promise of being useful in providing data about students' development. One method has been to have instructors and field supervisors indicate that students have demonstrated acceptable levels of competence. Another has been the use of pre- and post-tests of students when they are enrolled in the Techniques of Counseling course. This instrument was deve-

loped by Porter (1950), and the results provide an indication of how well students can communicate understanding of counselee statements. A one tailed t test for the difference between pre- and post-test means of two sections of the course, treated as one group, resulted in a t value of 5.43. This result suggests that the post-test mean was higher than the pre-test mean beyond the .05 level of significance.

In order to assess student performance in actual counseling situations, tape recordings of their work in the Counseling Practicum are rated by fellow students and faculty, using as guidelines the Scales for Assessment of Interpersonal Functioning (Carkhuff 1969). In addition to providing an assessment of basic counseling skills, this procedure is a valuable learning experience for the students making judgments because they develop skills in discriminating response levels.

The desire to obtain feedback about counselee's perceptions of counselors regarding communication of empathy, positive regard, genuineness, and specificity of expression led to the construction of a five item multiple choice instrument called the Counselor Facilitative Effectiveness Inventory (Renick and Cerio 1974). Its use has been very limited, but it will be administered in conjunction with the Relationship Inventory (G. T. Barrett-Lennard 1962) this year to see if there are any relationships between the ratings made by counselees on the two. Although both of these rating scales rely on counselee perceptions, it is hoped that their use will take us closer to assessment of some of the competencies that are consistent with the aims and objectives of the program.

Summary

The counselor education program at St. Lawrence University is committed to the philosophy of student centered, humanistic education while attempting to comply with state mandated regulations to become competency based. Limited data suggest that the openness and free interaction between faculty and students tend to facilitate a climate of trust in which self-understanding and self-awareness of students can and does occur. Feed-back from graduates supports the continuation of the program's orientation, and measures of counseling competencies of students suggest that counseling skills can be developed in such an environment.

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